

The Future (of) Sacco and Vanzetti

ON AUGUST 28, 1927, after a funeral that had gathered a huge crowd under a torrential rain, the corpses of Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were transferred to the Forest Hills Cemetery, Boston. As part of the cremation procedure, a state employee filled out certificates indicating the cause of death for the two Italians: *Electric shock – Judicial homicide*.

A few days earlier, during the night of August 22/23, Sacco and Vanzetti had been executed by electric chair, after one of the longest and most controversial trials in American history. The words written by the Boston Municipal Commander express a quite common feeling: many at the time, and still today, consider these executions a form of “judicial murder.” The two Italians were victims.

NINETY YEARS HAVE NOW passed, and in many aspects today’s America is different from that of the 1920s. Yet in spite of the inevitable differences, it is undeniable that the sociopolitical situation of the earlier era has striking similarities with the present. Consider immigration: the Trump administration is adopting an approach very similar to the anti-immigration hysteria of the twenties, and the repeated attempts to introduce a Muslim ban suggest that the new government has already identified its scapegoat.

If there is one thing the Sacco and Vanzetti case shows clearly, it is that authoritarian power doesn’t really need a guilty party to capture the discontent of the majority; what it must have is a sufficiently credible enemy, so that it may leverage and adopt measures that otherwise would be unpopular. Moreover, the climate in which the Sacco and Vanzetti process took place was, to borrow from the contemporary lexicon, *post-truth*: preestablished opinions prevented rigorous assessment of the facts, and facts themselves were inflated and used as a weapon in organizing a reactionary political project.

Walter F. Starbucks, the main character of Vonnegut’s *Jailbird*, writes: “I find myself thinking even now that the story of Sacco and Vanzetti may

yet enter the bones of future generations. Perhaps it needs to be told only a few more times.” Ninety years later, retelling their story in a new light still has something to teach us about today.

THE CASE

FERDINANDO NICOLA SACCO and Bartolomeo Vanzetti came to the United States between 1908 and 1909, joining a migratory flow that brought about thirteen million Italian immigrants between 1890 and 1915. Both came from peasant families, though they were not particularly disadvantaged. Sacco became a skilled worker, married, and had a son; he lived for a long time in Milford, Massachusetts, where he led a dignified life. Vanzetti, on the other hand, had more difficulties: he held a myriad of humble jobs and experienced more directly prejudice and social exclusion.

Around 1912, the two joined the Cronaca Sovversiva group led by Luigi Galleani, perhaps the most famous anarchist in the United States at that time. In experience and temperament, Sacco and Vanzetti had always been close to the weakest parts of society; they knew the miserable conditions of workers and the abuse of power by the ruling classes. In general, immigrants were well aware of how much the American society concealed behind its rhetoric about a “Land of Freedom”—a reality built upon exploitation, racism, and violence. Galleanist anarchism offered them a promise of immediate and revolutionary action against these systematic abuses. The radicalization process of Sacco and Vanzetti was therefore quite natural. It took place in a manner similar to that of many other members of the proletariat: the two Italians met in 1916, long after they already had become militants in the movement. In that year they both took part in various worker demonstrations, and both had suffered from political retaliation. Sacco had been arrested because of political speeches; Vanzetti led a strike in Plymouth and, as a result, he had difficulties finding a new job. Years later, he would become a fish seller.

WITH THE OUTBREAK of the First World War, the fate of anarchists in the United States began to worsen everywhere. The terrible Ludlow massacre of 1914, in which troopers killed twenty-one strikers—including women and children—already marked a turning point in the repression. The Red Scare had begun. Memory of the October Revolution in Russia was still vivid, and the anxiety toward Communists—and more

generally toward anyone who professed radical ideas—reached unprecedented heights.

In his novel *The Big Money*, John Dos Passos speaks of “the delirious year 1920,” recalling the fierce hunt for Reds in Massachusetts, with its alliance of attacks by the press and police busts, generating an atmosphere of sheer frenzy and suspicion. The criminalization of an entire set of political opinions, and not just of the more extreme fringes, was under way.

Action, reaction. The anarchists replied with a series of dynamite attacks, and the government fired back with more arrests, as well as with increasingly antidemocratic laws, indiscriminate sentencing, and expulsions, and these measures in turn provoked a further armed response from political militants. The vicious circle seemed unstoppable.

ON MAY 3, 1920, the anarchist Andrea Salsedo fell from a window on the fourteenth floor of an FBI office. Sacco and Vanzetti, who had for some time been preparing to return home, were terrified; Vanzetti in particular, since he had been a friend of Salsedo's. Two days later, they went to pick up a car in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, with two fellow anarchists: the car's owner, Mario Buda, and Riccardo Orciani. The auto repair shop, however, was closed, and the mechanic refused to give them the vehicle: he had been warned in advance by the local police chief, who had been chasing Buda for a long time. Sacco and Vanzetti then boarded a tram, where they were arrested. Both were armed, and Sacco also had a leaflet that promoted fund-raising for the Salsedo family. The interrogation that followed focused on their political views: frightened, the two suspects lied.

Put in jail, on September 11, Sacco and Vanzetti were accused of being the perpetrators, twenty days before their arrest, of an armed robbery in South Braintree, Massachusetts, where a cashier and a security guard at the Slater-Morrill Shoe Company were killed. The car they were supposed to pick up, according to investigators, was the vehicle used for the crime.

Action, reaction. On September 16, 1920, a bomb hidden in a horse cart exploded on Wall Street. The horrific attack resulted in thirty-eight deaths and hundreds of injured: the perpetrators were never identified with certainty, but there is little doubt about the anarchist imprint. Some historians, including Paul Avrich, believe that the perpetrator was actually Mario Buda, eager to avenge the arrest of his friends. In any case, the massacre further deteriorated the climate.

THE MAIN GOAL claimed by the anarchists is to overturn a system they deem unjust, namely any form of human exploitation; they work for the development of a free and autonomous society. In this view, the modern and capitalistic state is the real enemy, for it masks a structurally unjust, repressive organization.

On the methods to be used for their revolution, there is no general agreement between anarchists. The use of violence is tolerated, but the more sophisticated thinkers advocate for coherence between means and ends: Errico Malatesta, for example, strongly rejected terrorism and thought violence a sad necessity, to be employed only for defense and not to build the new utopia. On the contrary, Galleani was a rather incendiary and intolerant type, well versed in the use of force.

Sacco and Vanzetti belonged to the latter tendency. As Paul Avrich underscores in *The Anarchist Background*, “Both men . . . were social militants who advocated relentless warfare against government and capital. Far from being the innocent dreamers so often depicted by their supporters, they belonged to a branch of the movement that preached insurrectionary violence and armed retaliation, including the use of dynamite and assassination.” While in jail, they appealed to comrades for a direct response to the infamy of their imprisonment: “If we have to die for a crime we didn’t commit,” Vanzetti wrote in 1926, “we want revenge, revenge in our name.”

Many intellectuals who have mobilized on their behalf have, more or less consciously, sugarcoated the two Italians, transforming them into innocuous pacifists and icons of progressive liberalism. But this actually creates a double form of hypocrisy. On one side, Sacco and Vanzetti were considered to be foreign enemies and strangers to the so-called American way of life; on the other side, some wanted to reintegrate them as symbols of the selfsame philosophy. In actuality, the freedom they called for was much more radical and substantial.

THE TRIAL AGAINST Sacco and Vanzetti began in Dedham on May 31, 1921; on July 14, 1921, they were convicted and sentenced to death. District Attorney Frederick Katzmann focused the line of accusation on alleged factual elements (e.g., the testimony of eyewitnesses and the discovery of bullets in South Braintree, ascribable to Sacco’s gun), although he would also play a “consciousness of guilt” card. The two Italians had lied after their arrest, hence they were guilty.

That the judicial procedure was polluted by strong prejudices and influenced by the climate of distrust toward the radicals is widely acknowl-

edged. (Judge Webster Thayer famously defined the accused as “those anarchistic bastards”). Yet, paradoxically, the defense was also to blame, insofar as their decision to ride the currents of contemporary opinion transformed the trial into a political issue. Of course, this move also transformed the responsibilities of the jury into a judgment about identity: not only were these two alleged murderers; first of all, they were Italian anarchist immigrants and draft dodgers. And the operation failed precisely for these reasons: instead of producing a crisis of conscience, it solidified the prejudices of the jurors. This strategy also played a part in the lineup of witnesses called by the defense: they were mostly Italian—people from the neighborhood who had bought Vanzetti’s fish, for example—and their humble appearance and poor mastery of English fueled even more suspicion.

In sum, the criteria used for the verdict were neither reliable nor fair. As such, even if some of the evidence in favor of the accused, after more careful analysis, has not held up, this does not undermine the severity of the political and social problem: the weight of preconceptions and prejudice that contributed to condemning two men to death.

Letters discovered in 2006 show that Upton Sinclair—who wrote a documentary novel, *Boston*, based on the Sacco and Vanzetti trial—had his own doubts about their innocence, yet he still believed their execution was “the most shocking crime that has been committed in American history since the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.”

Sinclair was not alone. Between 1921 and 1927, a large campaign to defend Sacco and Vanzetti developed, involving intellectuals such as John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dos Passos, Stefan Zweig, Maxim Gorky, and Bertrand Russell. Rallies gathered more than fifty million signatures worldwide, and motions for a new trial and requests for clemency were promoted.

But none of this worked, nor did the confession of the Portuguese thief Celestino Madeiros, who in 1926 claimed responsibility for the South Braintree robbery. Judge Thayer did not allow the additional evidence, defining Madeiros’s confession as “unreliable, untrustworthy, and untrue.” On April 9, 1927, a death sentence was delivered. The Massachusetts governor did entrust a review of the trial to a commission presided over by the Harvard president; however, it determined that a retrial was unwarranted.

And so, during the night of the twenty-second and twenty-third of August 1927, the two Italian anarchists were brought to the electric chair. Both maintained a very dignified attitude. Sacco, having greeted his wife,

sons, and friends, went to his death saying, “Farewell, Mother.” Vanzetti reiterated his innocence and thanked everyone for the “human and civil treatment.” Immediately after the executions, protests and insurrections broke out all over the world.

Only in 1977, for the fiftieth anniversary of their death, would Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis proclaim a “Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial Day,” explicitly admitting the mistakes of the trial. However, although his proclamation stated that “any stigma and disgrace” should be removed from the names of Sacco and Vanzetti, he did not explicitly assert their innocence.

THE RED IMMIGRANT SCARE

NEARLY A CENTURY LATER, the thermometer measuring fear of the “Reds” appears to have reached a historical minimum. Yet some social dynamics today closely recall those of the 1920s.

Isolationism, first of all: With his “America First” campaign, Donald Trump didn’t just sell the fairy tale of a return to an illusory Arcadia, where the United States was a self-sufficient democracy blessed by divine approval. He also singled out a number of particular enemies to satisfy the thirst for “justice” in voters plagued by a decade of uncertainty.

This is an old refrain: in the absence of convincing arguments or suggestions, you earn people’s trust by persuading them they have a common enemy to fight. Trump is known for his ability to turn any potential opponent into an “enemy of the people,” but there is one sector of the population on which he has focused with unusual tenacity: immigrants.

On this so-called issue, facts speak clearly: the United States is not currently experiencing a migration emergency. The latest Pew Research data reveals that although the number of foreign-born residents has increased from 24.1 million in 2000 to 32.5 in 2014, the number of illegal immigrants in recent years has settled onto a stable plateau, and between 2007 and 2014 it actually decreased, from 12.2 million to 11.1 million. Regular immigrants annually pay more than \$100 billion in taxes, they are responsible for 47 percent of the workforce growth in 2014 alone but earn 18.6 percent less than the average U.S.-born citizen.

During the electoral campaign, the current president provided completely different figures, describing an out-of-control situation where illegal immigrants were purported to be around 30 million. This statement was given a “Pants on Fire” rating by Politifact, and yet Trump has continued to

use this point of reference for a number of his potential measures. Among these are limitations to the birthright citizenship provided by the Fourteenth Amendment (limitations often referred to as *Kate's Law*); harsher penalties for those who enter the country illegally for a second time; and the mass deportation of all illegal immigrants.

On January 27, 2017, not even a week after his inauguration in Washington, Trump signed Executive Order 13769, a measure that would have suspended the United States Refugee Admission Program for 120 days. It would also have obstructed indefinitely the reception of refugees from Syria, introduced a limit on the number of eligible refugees into the United States to 50,000 for the current year, and forbade entry into the country for citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

This order, as well as the one that replaced it on March 16, has been criticized by many as being economically damaging, antidemocratic, and, above all, perfectly useless in what is ostensibly its main objective: fighting terrorism. To underestimate the first steps of this presidency on immigration, however, may be dangerous.

However clumsy, Trump's move follows an old strategy. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many immigration laws have been promulgated in the name of protecting the country from terrorism. The Immigration Act of 1903—commonly known as the Anarchist Exclusion Act—banned beggars, prostitutes, epileptics, and anarchists. In the eleven years that it was in force, the law had an almost nonexistent impact: fifteen people were blocked at the frontier and seven were expelled. The Immigration Act of 1918—known as the Alien Anarchists Exclusion Act—led to the arrest of thousands of anarchists, of whom only a few hundred were actually deported, including Luigi Galleani himself.

In the 1920s, when Sacco and Vanzetti were already behind bars, Congress approved two measures whose purpose was more racial than precautionary. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 set a limit on the number of foreign citizens welcomed to the United States at 3 percent of the current U.S. population originally from that country, as registered by the 1910 Census; the Immigration Act of 1924 reduced the quota to 2 percent.

These moves had the clear purpose of deterring immigration from southern and eastern Europe, and, unlike the acts excluding anarchists, they were all too successful. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 4 million Italians arrived in the United States (more than any other ethnic group); in 1924, the total number of Italians allowed to arrive on American soil was only 4,000. (In fact, in 1924 the number of Italians who arrived in the

United States was smaller than the number who left.) Targeted measures were replaced by cross-cutting legislation: the fear of a revolution had been transformed into a fear of the immigrants.

Today, anyone who attends a Trump rally will catch a similar vibe, which leads us to ask: what categories today stand the greatest risk of similar exploitation?

INTERSECTIONAL SCAPEGOATING

SEARCH FOR THE TERM “scapegoat” on Google and, along with encyclopedia and dictionary entries, you’ll find a lot of click-bait lists, including some where Sacco and Vanzetti even appear in the cover picture.

Why them? The fact that they belonged to the most feared anarchist group of their time is definitely a crucial component, but it is not the only factor.

In October 2016, the lawyer and civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw inaugurated a TED talk by asking the audience to stand up: “Now I’m going to name some names,” she said. “When you hear a name you don’t recognize, I’d like you to take a seat and stay seated.” Crenshaw then began to list names such as Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner, many of whom were African American men and boys killed by the police in recent years. As was foreseeable, only a few sat down. But when Crenshaw began to name others, such as Aura Rosser, Tanisha Brown, and Meagan Hockaday, only five people (including the speaker) were left standing in the room.

In 1989, Crenshaw developed an “intersectionality theory” to explain how individuals belonging to two or more distinct minorities often find themselves in an even more vulnerable position than people ascribable to only one of the categories.

Let’s take an example. In October 2015, to advertise the release of *The Suffragettes*, the movie’s protagonists were photographed wearing a T-shirt that sported a controversial phrase by Emmeline Pankhurst: “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave.” The initiative soon turned out to be a boomerang: the image of four wealthy white women comparing sexism to slavery sparked controversy. The problem was not the T-shirts themselves: the photo shoot caused a stir because it touched a gaping wound linked to the birth of the American feminist movement.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the universal suffrage movement had gained deep roots in the Northern states, but was struggling to

break into the South. To overcome this problem, some supporters thought of leveraging race: if white women in Southern states earned the right to vote, they would counterbalance the political weight of African Americans. Paradoxically, while women were finally obtaining visibility and electoral rights, those who were at the intersection with another marginalized category had become even less visible, less protected, and therefore more vulnerable. At rallies, for instance, black women were relegated to the back, as in any segregated bus.

If Sacco and Vanzetti were ideal scapegoats, it was because they also were intersectional. As Italians, they were seen as nonwhite, and were the target of prejudices dating back to the late nineteenth century, racism that had on occasion resulted in mass lynchings. As anarchists they were automatically considered outlaws, and their lack of familiarity with the English language made it even more difficult for them to argue in their own defense.

“My conviction is that I have suffered for things that I am guilty of,” wrote Bartolomeo Vanzetti, in his last statement before the scaffold. “I am suffering because I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian, and I am an Italian . . . but I am so convinced that if you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I’ve done already.”

To consider Sacco and Vanzetti merely as scapegoats, however, is inadequate. In the sense given by Kenneth Burke and René Girard, the so-called scapegoat mechanism is comparable to a safety valve. When a community goes through major difficulties (concerning resources, rights, future perspectives), it’s possible to conceal the real issue by identifying a common enemy—often an already marginalized minority—and divert the frustration of the majority toward this more vulnerable target.

In this sense, the target par excellence in the United States has historically been the African American population. “Black workers have periodically become scapegoats when a serious economic crisis threatens white livelihoods,” writes Joe Feagin in his study *Racist America*. “They, along with Asian, Latino, and Jewish Americans, have been singled out as targets of anger, even though they are not responsible for the employment or other economic problems of white workers. . . . This continuing exploitation of black workers not only helps to maintain income and wealth inequality across the color line but also is critical to the reproduction of the entire system of racism over long periods of time.”

The story of Sacco and Vanzetti, on the other hand, also recalls the

dynamics of two other types of victimization. In psychology, the term “identified (or designated) patient” defines the member of a dysfunctional family chosen by the remaining members—often unconsciously—as an embodiment of insecurities, discomforts, and problems that afflict the family unit as a whole.

The identified patient, usually a child, essentially becomes the only bearer for all familial disorders, and his role can become so fundamental to the healthy balance of the household that in many cases other family members will instinctively try to hinder any of his attempts to thrive.

A similar dynamic was adopted—consciously, in this case—by the tutors responsible for the education of the Tudor heirs. Since the divine right of the king required that nobody, apart from the monarch, could punish the prince, the tutors chose a child—the whipping boy—who would be raised along with the prince and punished in his place whenever the prince behaved badly. The theory was that if the prince witnessed someone he was emotionally close to suffer for a misdeed that he himself committed, the prince would learn to behave properly.

Sacco and Vanzetti were simultaneously the designated patient for the extended American family and the whipping boy for the workers’ movement: they were unwittingly designated as embodiments of society’s corruption, and purposely selected as a means of disciplining its most restless and uncontrollable faction. In short, their arrest was never intended as a means for concealing the problems of their society; in fact, it achieved precisely the opposite result.

PUBLIC ENEMIES

ON JUNE 26, 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed a mitigated version of the Presidential Executive Order known informally as the “Muslim ban,” to come into effect. Since February, the current administration had attempted to pass a measure that banned the entry of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries, arbitrarily labeled as potential exporters of terrorism. To achieve this goal, Trump has come up with a cosmetic operation to make the executive order digestible to the U.S. judicial system; nonetheless, the original measure still faces a strong objection from courts and civil rights activists. The reason is simple: the U.S. Constitution prevents the government from producing laws that discriminate against people based on their social status, place of birth, and religious beliefs. The very fact that Trump keeps tweeting that

America needs a proper “travel ban” does not help. Instead, it serves to make the whole issue seem ridiculous, thus diverting attention from what is actually a serious problem.

Although unconstitutional, counterproductive, and useless for what should be its actual purpose (opposing terrorism), the different incarnations of the Muslim ban are evidence of both precision and urgency in the policies of the executive branch. In no other case has Trump proved so determined, and it seems likely that, rather than a particularly arbitrary form of Islamophobia, behind this obstinacy lies the will to identify a target for the social hatred and insecurities of the American people.

Trump realizes that in shaking the ashes of 9/11, he will find embers burning still, and he knows that the specter of Islamist terrorism still triggers spontaneous fears nationwide. On January 21, his second day in office, during a speech at CIA headquarters, the president insisted on a point he had already made during the election campaign: Islamic radicalism is enemy number one in the United States.

In order to understand how vulnerable the social category of Muslim immigrants is to potential exploitation, it is useful to consider the story of Tarek Mehanna (which also took place in Boston). Mehanna is an Egyptian pharmacist who found himself on the FBI’s radar, in part because of his refusal to collaborate with the agency as a spy and informer. In November 2008, he was arrested and later placed under guardianship; two years later, the FBI stopped him again and charged him with conspiracy and support for terrorism. The investigation was based on activities by Mehanna that did not involve direct cooperation with jihadists, but simply propaganda and published opinions. Mehanna had argued online about potential justifications for terrorist attacks and had published translations of jihadist material.

The pharmacist declared that he did not share the ideas of al-Qaeda; in particular, he argued against the legitimacy of retaliatory attacks on U.S. civilians, but he did claim the right of Muslims to defend themselves against oppressors:

Common sense is renamed “terrorism” and the people defending themselves against those who come to kill them from across the ocean become the terrorists who are “killing Americans.” The mentality that America was victimized when British soldiers walked these streets two and a half centuries ago is the same mentality Muslims are victimized by as American soldiers walk their streets today. It’s the mentality of colonialism.

In 2012 Mehanna was sentenced to seventeen and a half years in jail by the federal court in Boston.

As Andrew F. March—who was summoned as a defense expert—wrote in the *New York Times*, this heavy punishment was based solely on opinions:

Those acts were not used by the government to demonstrate the intent or mental state behind some other crime in the way racist speech was used to prove that a violent act was a hate crime. They *were* the crime, because the conspiracy was to support Al Qaeda by advocating for it through speech.

The central issue is thus a crime of opinion, and falls under the protection that the First Amendment is intended to guarantee.

And yet there is another interesting point linking the pharmacist's case to Sacco and Vanzetti's: like the two Italians, Mehanna belongs to two intersectional categories (immigrants and Muslims) around which the worst fears of public opinion tend to cohere. In an article for *The Progressive*, Rebecca Ruth Gould has stressed the existence of a double standard for white terrorists, comparing Mehanna with Jeremy Joseph Christian. Before killing two men in Portland, Oregon—men who had defended two Muslim women from his harassment—Christian had repeatedly asserted his white supremacist views on Facebook. “Had Christian been deploying the rhetoric of ISIS on Facebook, he would have been under FBI surveillance,” Gould points out. “Why, then, are white supremacists allowed to threaten violence against innocents while authorities look the other way? Why are people still willing to make excuses when expressions of racist hate turn into racist action?”

It is hard not to read in such disparities the emotional result of events dating at least from the first Gulf War, and after which an equivalence between the words “Muslim” and “enemy” has become progressively strengthened. In this context, though it would be easy to dismiss Trump's extravagant statements against Muslims as simply irrational, it would also be counterproductive. By isolating a specific slice of people who purportedly “hate America”—Muslims in general, and even worse if they're immigrants, or otherwise socially outcast—Trump's administration pursues a goal that mirrors the antiradical crusades of the 1920s, which had as its consequences the expulsion of many innocents and the deaths of Sacco and Vanzetti.

What happened to Mehanna contains this development in a nutshell.

Few stood up in defense of his constitutional rights, and even fewer stressed the most crucial point: how a verdict of this sort carries an implicit risk for American democracy itself. Yet that is in fact the point. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos reminded his readers that the killing of Sacco and Vanzetti concerned them personally, insofar as it concerned any real possibility for obtaining future justice. Whatever opinion one might have of the two anarchists, the outcome of the hasty trial weakened everyone's system of rights.

WHITE FEAR MATTERS

LAST JANUARY 4, a woman from Chicago posted on her Facebook profile a live video in which an eighteen-year-old boy was attacked and tortured by a group of peers. A few hours later, the assailants were identified and arrested on hate crime charges. As they kicked and punched the guy in a corner, and hit him on the head with a knife, the assailants shouted phrases like "Fuck white people!" and "Fuck Trump!" Though the four did not belong to any political group or activist association, some have blamed this isolated episode on the Black Lives Matter movement. Within hours of the news, Richard Spencer (founder of the AltRight.org site, known for his racist and supremacist positions) posted a tweet about the episode using the hashtag #BLMKidnapping.

However creative, Spencer's labeling of the event shouldn't have astonished anyone; after all, this was the same person who in speeches had incited white crowds by talking about "peaceful ethnic cleansing." And it is not the first time that the Black Lives Matter movement has been asked to account for the violent actions of individuals unassociated with its organization.

In September 2016, on *Frontpage*, a conservative online magazine run by David Horowitz, Raymond Ibrahim claimed to have found a direct link between Black Lives Matter and Islamic terrorism. He insinuated that, since its birth in 2013, the movement had been "influenced by al-Qaeda's rhetoric and propaganda." He also spoke of Ismaaiyl Abdullah Brinsley, the man who murdered two officers in the summer of 2014 (to avenge the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown) as "the original Black Lives Matter cop killer." Yet Brinsley had no connection with Black Lives Matter, and was close to extremist groups that had nothing in common with the movement.

This kind of confusion is not casual. Last year Larry Klayman, a conservative lawyer and founder of Judicial Watch, and Demetrick Pennie, a

Dallas police officer, filed a civil lawsuit, citing an unlikely assortment of potential defendants, including Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, George Soros, the New Black Panther Party, and Black Lives Matter. All were allegedly (and indifferently) guilty of having “repeatedly incited their supporters and others to engage in threats of and attacks to cause serious bodily injury or death upon police officers and other law enforcement persons of all races and ethnicities.”

Apparently it makes no difference that on every available occasion Black Lives Matter has firmly condemned retaliatory actions against law enforcement. It doesn't matter that the group has repeatedly expressed its opposition to any kind of nonpeaceful initiative. It unwillingly provides a convenient target for those interested in claiming that black activism is necessarily antiwhite, in suggesting that blacks are intrinsically violent, and in covering up this accusation behind the illusory idea of a post-racial society.

“Empathy for one party is always prejudice against another.” So said then senator Jeff Sessions in 2009, during his intervention challenging Sonia Sotomayor's appointment as a Supreme Court justice. Though still aberrant, such opinions appear to be part of an ever-growing trend. A Harvard Business School study published in 2011 found that among whites, the belief persists that racism is a zero-sum game. In this respect, any reduction in inequality for blacks would result in an increase in inequality for the white population. Thirty percent of respondents (men and women of all ages, degrees of education, and social origins) stated that they were victims of some kind of discrimination; nearly half of them are convinced that this supposed antiwhite discrimination has exceeded that affecting African Americans.

The birth of Black Lives Matter has thus led to distrust, not only among those who want to use race strategically for their own political ends, but also among those who, however wrongly, see it as a threat to their lifestyle. It is under this light that we must consider reactive phenomena such as All Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, as well as petitions that lobby to include Black Lives Matter among the so-called hate groups.

THE PRICE OF THE DREAM

LIKE MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS, Black Lives Matter activists also belong to the intersectional profile that we have identified. Yet despite being frequently subjected to scapegoating, the movement is now too popular

to be a plausible target for specious criminalization. And if the distorted image of Black Lives Matter as an extremist movement struggles, we cannot exclude that soon the target will shift to the extreme fringes of black activism.

There are organizations that advocate a violent and divisive approach to racial issues, and it's not difficult to find explicitly racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic factions among them. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), in the past two years the number of "hate groups" linked to black separatism has almost doubled, from 113 in 2014 to 193 in 2016. The SPLC is also convinced that under Trump's administration this curve will increase.

Although it's not entirely fanciful to consider militant black separatists as hypothetical victims, we must not forget that in the 1920s anarchists such as Sacco and Vanzetti did not enjoy the favor of public opinion at all. The Galleanists appeared as frightening figures insofar as they combined the characteristics of two marginalized groups: immigrants and exploited workers. Black separatists are frightening because, despite some unjustifiable positions, they are increasingly gaining approval. It is understandable that African Americans—and other marginalized groups as well—would see in Trump's election the end of any hope of social or racial change through nonviolent democratic confrontation.

When on July 7, 2016, Micah Xavier Johnson shot five police officers with a semiautomatic rifle on the streets of Dallas, Trump (then a presidential candidate) spoke of "an attack on our country, and an attack on our families," claiming that the shootings had "shaken the soul of our nation." Yet Johnson was an American citizen: if Trump could afford to treat him as a foreign terrorist and get away with it, it was because he had black skin and had been close to the New Black Panther Party.

On January 20, a page entitled "Standing Up For Our Law Enforcement Community" appeared in the "Top Issues" section of the White House website, explaining the administration's priorities in managing law enforcement: "The dangerous anti-police atmosphere in America is wrong," reads the statement. "The Trump Administration will end it." In the meantime, the state of New Jersey updated its "Terrorism Threat Assessment," bringing the level of threat of anarchist and black separatist groups from "low" to "moderate," thus putting them essentially on the same level as ISIS.

In his National Book Award-winning book *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates suggested that the dream of a pure America, a country

where everyone has equal opportunities, is indeed a dream state, one granted to a single social category: white people. Or rather, quoting James Baldwin, to “those who believe they are white” and need to be affirmed as such.

The campaign of Donald Trump conjured, for his voters, the image of an Arcadian and self-sufficient America, a nation whose enemies would be easily identifiable and vanquished at all costs. Trump was simply feeding the most retrograde form of that dream—the same fantasyland where Sacco and Vanzetti died ninety years ago. Striving to identify the next potential victims of this ideology is not simply an act of civil responsibility, it’s also an exercise of political analysis, for two reasons.

The first concerns the judicial system as much as society as a whole. In a context in which factual verification is no longer considered a value, any defense of civil and constitutional rights becomes difficult, and the need for hardheaded reactions appears pressing. Under such conditions, the rule of law can always revert to a tragic cycle of revenge.

The second reason is more radical: in the United States, as elsewhere, there are ethnic and social categories that have historically been subject to non-stop discrimination, and such treatment tends to get worse the more that these categories are intersectionally overlapping. A white, Christian, middle-class man will certainly be safer—and his rights more likely to be protected—than a poor, black or brown, Muslim woman, someone whose rights still remain inalienable from the formal point of view but are concretely trampled on, on a daily basis.

So the real question we must pose to ourselves—if we want to learn something from this story—is the following: If two Black Lives Matter activists were to be arrested on murder charges, no doubt thousands of people would protest and demand a fair trial. But what would occur if the arrested were members of the New Black Panther Party, or two Pakistani immigrants attending a mosque in which the imam was suspected of jihadism? Who would rally to protect them from exploitation? What would keep them from being transformed into scapegoats? And how many would be willing to grant them the presumption of innocence?

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